

SUSTAINABILITY AND DEMOCRACY

Are political parties getting in the way of the sort of collaborative democracy we need to tackle sustainability? If so, what can we do about it?

An essay by SARA PARKIN

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INTRODUCTION

In Bangladesh recently, David Miliband called for “clean and effective” democracy. What is it and why does it matter for sustainability? This essay argues that it matters a lot, yet despite more *angst demokratie* in the press and chatterati about democracy since Charter 88 was founded, there is little fundamental analysis about why democracy is struggling. Most reviews, like the Power Report,¹ and the government’s recent Green Paper *The Governance of Britain*,² are about detailed tinkering with the system, and don’t think hard about what it is we want a democratic system to do for us in the 21st century. In particular, the role of a plurality of competing political parties are viewed uncritically to be the *sine qua non* of any system calling itself democratic. Even the comparatively radical Demos booklet proposing an Everyday Democracy Index that scores EU countries on their “lived experience” of democracy, did not examine the role of political parties in whether that locally lived experience is good or not, only the ‘colour’ of the eventual government which they found to be neutral in effect.³

Could it be that political parties are no longer relevant? Or worse, actually anti-democratic? Paradoxically, it was reading the case *for* political parties in a pamphlet from the Young Foundation that prompted me to this question.⁴ So, after trying to envisage what an ‘ideal’ 21st century democracy might be like, the role of political parties in achieving it is examined. The conclusion is that they are, at best, a diversion from the main business of democracy – to provide a system which enables us to do things together in a way that we are proud of and happy to be involved with.

Finally, if we were to give up on political parties, how would we elect people to the various levels of government? A proposal is made, that is radical in how different it is to the current party political model, but mainstream in that it uses the same method for appointing people to positions of responsibility in other organisations. It would, I argue, completely ‘remake’ the relationships between citizens with their elected members, and inject trust and joy into what has become in the UK the most dismal and ill-viewed job apart from that of a journalist!

(By default and for convenience, I refer to the UK political process in this essay, but much of what I say has, I hope, wider relevance.)

Why democracy matters to achieving sustainability

Theoretically at least, sustainability could be realised through a ‘benign’ dictatorship (whatever that is), or anarchy, but you don’t need to think for long to realise that democracy is the best bet. Even if I was the benign dictator I can’t think of any way to bring people to the task except to give their voice some power. And anyone involved in the women’s movement in the 1970s knows anarchy gets you nowhere! Churchill thought it through a while ago, and the closing paragraph of *Limits to Growth* reminds us that: “The crux of the matter is not only whether the human species will survive, but even more whether it can survive without falling into a state of worthless existence.”⁵

¹ *Power to the People*, The Power Report, an independent inquiry into Britain’s Democracy, 27th February 2006, Joseph Rowntree CT/Reform Trust, York

² www.justice.gov.uk/publications

³ Paul Skidmore and Kirsten Bound (2008) *The Everyday Democracy Index*, Demos, London

⁴ Fiona Mactaggart, Geoff Mulgan and Rushanara Ali (?2006/7) *Parties for the Public Good*, The Young Foundation, London

⁵ Meadows et al (1972) *Limits to Growth: report for the Club of Rome*, Earth Island Ltd, London

Unsustainable development (or more precisely one of its major symptoms, climate change), has been described as the biggest market failure the world has ever seen.⁶ Yet surely it is the biggest failure of democracy the world has every seen. How come that even the so-called 'mature' democracies have been caught short by massive global problems like oil and food shortages, climate change and now obesity and the financial system's Faustian pact with debt? Straddling the time when the Berlin Wall came down, I lectured senior NATO officers about the implications of environmental degradation to security policy. They were very surprised at what happened in 1989 while East European citizens knew something was about to give. Intelligence services are made scape-goats for lots of things, but it is democratically elected governments that tell them what to look for. We need democracy to be alert to the rumbles of change in order to anticipate and head off the worst and grasp the opportunities of the best.

A top class democratic process is needed to get us onto a sustainable path for human progress because we need to orchestrate what is, in effect, the mother of all collaborations. Competitiveness within and between democracies (be it ideological, class or economic) has kept us focussed on the wrong ball for decades. Now we have institutions, and rules of engagement that are constructed to manage that competitive environment. The whole post WWII strategy of the US was to keep Russia at bay, secure the loyalty of European allies and ensure a climate favourable to US policy, including trade. The Marshall Plan was not altruistic, it was strategic. In the forward to a paper from IPPR, Hilary Benn points out "were we designing a global governance system now, our priorities would not be rebuilding Europe or Japan ... the foremost challenges would be trade and investment, climate change and scarcity of resources, state failures, conflicts within states, the movement of peoples, international corruption, and organised crime and terrorism."⁷ The paper argues that post WWII institutions, which are governed ostensibly through collaborating countries, are not fit for this purpose, they are still locked in the post war 'them and us' mentality, even if the competition is now based more on economic than political ideologies.

We know that the next decade is critical to shifting the way we do everything onto a low-carbon strategy for a rising population, with a certainty of all sorts of calamities: black outs, food price escalation and shortages, weather extremes, dysfunctional financial markets. EDF has reputedly told Canary Wharf (which has a similar energy consumption to Wales) that it can have no more energy, as growth in supply has to be earmarked for the Olympics and the anticipation that Northern Rock will not be the only bank to fail mean the calamities are for now, not later. Only a supremely competent political leadership with a happy and collaborative relationship with its electorate can handle the transition to a low-carbon and palatable lifestyle while managing crises. Only a much more refined and robust idea of democracy than I can find anywhere, could deliver that quality of leadership and active citizens.

Further, such a democracy is part of any society that is sustainable. The real bottom line is made up of the stocks of environment (its goods and services) and human (our brains and brawn) capital. Everything else is a social construct – our economy, cities, language, culture, organisations, institutions and so on. The way we govern ourselves is a social enterprise just as much as is a business, football team, neighbourhood or professional association. We need the social enterprise of democracy to help heal wounds, reconcile differences, and celebrate success as we strive together for a common goal – it should be what makes us more than a sum of our parts. The continual improvement of governance

⁶ Nicholas Stern (2006) *The Economics of Climate Change*, HM Treasury, London

⁷ Ngaire Woods (2007) *Power Shift: do we need better global economic institutions?*, IPPR, London

systems (one aspect of building social capital) should be a hallmark of a successful civilisation. As the very wise Bantu saying goes: “a person is a person because of people.”

It is often said that the perfect democracy will be elusive because it involves power – and power inevitably corrupts. This is dangerous nonsense. Power does not corrupt; some people are corrupted by power and corrupt people are attracted to the opportunities power brings with it. Weak democratic systems make access to the corrupt or weak easier, and makes them harder to remove. That is no reason to give up however. Much more corrosive is absence of power. Local government in the UK is a good example. As Simon Jenkins points out, even French communes with an average population of 1500 have some discretionary powers (can raise money and direct services), and there is one elected official for every 120 people. In the UK the ratio is 1:2,600, and the average district council has a population of 150,000 with central government controlling the bulk of funding and how it is spent.⁸

Powerlessness is corrosive globally as well as locally. Over 50% of the world's population is under the age of 30, many of whom see a very bleak future. I know of no other way, apart from a proper democracy, that can bring that sense of hope and a feeling of real involvement in shaping their own destiny. Other, that is, than extremist groups which thrive in floods of fear and ignorance and deserts of hope - as they are right now.

Sustainable development, articulated as a practical and enjoyable vision of the future (without shying away from the problems and challenges because we have delayed so long) can give democracy a purpose that lifts it above historical accumulations of vengeance. At NATO I talked of consciously making the environment a diplomat for peace, offering genuinely ‘neutral territory’ on which to reconcile differences and make the necessary economic transition. The rule of diplomacy is to start negotiations from shared ground, and what is more shared by people, regardless of their race, culture and aggressive or oppressive track record than a need for a life-supporting environment? Failure to make the environment a tool for peace, I warned my audience, will guarantee it becomes a cause for conflict.

Woes of Democracy

In some ways democracy has been a great success. Over 60% people live today with a government they have elected, up from 25% 30 years ago. But something is adrift. Freedom House, a US organisation that rates the political rights and civil liberties of countries, reports a ‘freedom stagnation’ in 2007. It notes a “push back” against democracy in Russia, Venezuela, China, Iran and Zimbabwe and has downgraded Thailand and Congo (Brazzaville) from Partly Free to Not Free.⁹ In Kenya, the feeling that the ‘winner takes all power’ has stripped off the thin (and thought to be corrupt) veneer of the electoral process to reveal tribal based rivalries that have shocked the world, as did collapse of states into ‘tribal’ conflict and violence in Rwanda and the Balkans, and now Afghanistan.

These are very different countries, with different reasons for falling foul of the ‘liberal’ Freedom House criteria, but could part of the problem be that the democratic models touted by the west (and often tied to aid, trade) are seen as another shot at imperialism, with inbuilt assumptions about economic growth models and employment that clash with local traditions and aspirations? Are the values and objectives of democracy as promulgated by ‘donor’ nations and agencies explicit enough? David Miliband calls “democracy the best custodian of

⁸ Simon Jenkins, *Instead of elected local leaders, we have the police*, Guardian 27th February 2008

⁹ www.freedomhouse.org

trade.”¹⁰ Do we really believe that trading volumes of like goods or tacky goods and waste is sensible, or that our model of meeting human needs only via formal employment and pension regimes would work universally? We send confused signals, not least over inconsistent patronage of world leaders using criteria of economic or political ‘interests’ over ethics.

Are we also hypocritical in ignoring the fact that even in the UK we are, evolutionary speaking, still pretty tribal in our attitudes? Football fans are just one example, and as a Scot with an English accent I’ve been subject to an ugly (but verbal) racial attack in Edinburgh. Africa has (or had) some pretty sophisticated systems for maintaining peace that involved land, ritual, economic and social interconnectivity, and, as Amarta Sen points out, people have been designing and operating social governance systems for a very long time.¹¹ My favourite personal examples are from Mali and Scotland. Villages in the rural north of Mali have Council Huts, low, stone roofed buildings with open sides. This is where the village ‘elders’ meet. Because of the low roof, no one can rise in anger, and, because of the open sides, the whole village can listen to their deliberations. Women are excluded from the hut but have influence on the debate and who is ‘wise enough’ to join the elders. Modern architectural if not process versions of this type of ‘open democracy’ are seen in the construction of the Rikstag in Germany, and the Mayor of London’s City Hall. And interesting to watch will be The Elders, a new initiative that includes Nelson Mandela, Mary Robinson, Desmond Tutu and Kofi Annan.¹² The story from Scotland is a “time of great peace” during the 12th-14th century when the Lords of the Isles took collective responsibility for providing a degree of justice for the usually quarrelling clans. They met regularly on the island in the loch at Finlaggan on the Isle of Islay to hear appeals for justice, marriage, contracts and so on that could not be settled locally. The certainty of justice is deemed responsible for the peace.¹³

Promoting democracy around the world is stalling. Even in the so-called ‘mature’ democracies citizen disengagement from the process is marked. Despite global Gallup polls that say 8 out of 10 people want to live in a democracy, levels of voting in countries that have been democratic for ages have never been lower. In the UK, for example, the combined vote for the two major parties - Labour (35.2%) and Conservatives (32.4%) - in the 2005 general election was the lowest since 1923, with a turnout of only 61% meaning that only 21.6% of the eligible electorate actually voted for the incoming Labour government. Hardly a resounding mandate. No wonder the government appears to vacillate as it depends on continual opinion polling to find out the ‘mood’ of the people. The electoral system hides the considered views of people from the leadership. What use a manifesto if nearly 80% of the governed didn’t vote for it?

Moreover, the job of a politician is no life for a sane, well-rounded person. The life-style is hellish. It is one thing to sacrifice oneself to serve the people, but quite another to abdicate all other things that make life worth living – like families and friends. No wonder women are so little attracted. And it is getting worse. The 24/7 availability culture, and the danger of relaxed private moments being broadcast on YouTube is the lot of politicians as well as celebrities. The whole political process is now so stripped of elegance, authority and respect, that it has become a spectator sport not dissimilar to that of the Big Brother House

¹⁰ David Miliband *The Democratic Imperative* Aung San Suu Kyi Lecture, St Hugh’s College, Oxford 12th February 2008

¹¹ various writing but see, for example, Amartya Sen (1999) Democracy as a Universal Value in *Journal of Democracy*, 10.3 (1999) 3-17

¹² www.theelders.com

¹³ www.finlaggan.com

with all its cruelty and humiliations. So disaffected are people with the whole process that politicians – and political parties – each rank rock bottom in league tables of trusted people and institutions. An Ipsos MORI poll in 2006 found only 20% trusted politicians to tell the truth. Ministers scored scarcely better at 22%, and both were only worsted by journalists at 19%. A Eurobarometer poll found that of 16 different institutions political parties were least trusted – 76% did not trust them.

Yet without trust democracy is dead in the water. Woe indeed.

What do we want the democratic system to deliver?

We've one purpose for our democratic system - that is to enable us to do stuff together, in a way that we are proud of and happy to take part in.

The Governance of Britain “seeks to address two fundamental questions: how should we hold power accountable, and how should we uphold and enhance the rights and responsibilities of the citizen?” At least it is a start, but the ambition of the document is too micro-managerial and too slow, given the degree of mis-trust in politicians and politics, and the magnitude of the things we will have to do together. Global resource bases and ecological systems are failing, the debt dominoes of the financial system have started to tumble, all with social and economic consequences that will be – indeed are already – significant.

This is the moment to be much more bold about what we want. If we can't articulate what a top-class democratic system looks like, how can we strive towards it, never mind counsel others to do as we do? For sure, it is likely to be more complex than anything we have experienced so far, but maybe over-simplicity, and complacency about what we have got, are part of the problem.

So before going any further, here's what I think we might want our democratic system to do for us in the coming years, set out as the outcomes that will prove if it is working well or not.

1. **A trusted system of justice and rule of law** is independent and well resourced (from the courts to the police). There is lots of evidence about the premium people put on fairness, and it pervades all aspects of any democracy, though confidence that there is an irrevocable recourse to justice is crucial.
2. **The process of governance is attractive to be part of** both for citizen and as an *élu* (elected person) in any body. The procedures of the parliament or council are straightforward and transparent, with easy access to agendas, debates and decisions. (Better than Hansard and minutes, and free of spin!) Working hours and conditions are sensible, job-shares possible and other mechanisms make it a joy to be a politician – especially for those with other responsibilities. There is an end to career politicians, and a culture where many more of us give some time and some part of our lives to serving at some level of government.
3. **A truly representative system for public participation:** one that represents the view of the governed in the chamber, and includes the citizen as responsible (with the *élu*) for democratic choices. Different types of voting are used for different types of elections or for different sized constituency – all meeting minimum standards to guarantee that the chamber truly represents the view of the electorate that will be affected by the decision.

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4. **There is an 'intimacy of hierarchy'** in that the gap between backyard and national politics is closed. To facilitate collaboration over key issues there is a clear link between the powers and responsibilities 'vertically' (between community, local, region, national, international level), and 'horizontally' (across to other levels in other constituencies). Current political boundaries are, in boundary setting terms, juvenile. More ancient physical boundaries are more relevant to tackling especially environmental challenges. Examples of horizontal collaborations include the Antarctic (something similar needed urgently in the Arctic; around the Baltic and the Mediterranean Seas, over water in Israel and Palestine). Vertical links between global treaties, national policy and local councils can be found in various eco-system regeneration projects.
 5. **Fruitful public debate is commonplace** and the habit of public discussion about issues, destiny, and values restored. Finger in the air opinion polls are no substitute for fully considered views, and referenda are seen as a sign of a distrusted democracy. Instead there is a plethora of national and local deliberative processes, citizen's juries and so on, hosted by anyone, including interest groups, local media, neighbourhoods, or schools and colleges that may do it as part of education in citizenship or sustainability literacy. Innovative use of IT is made but in the knowledge that this is cold debate and no substitute for real life warm debate and relationship building. There are incentives to engage including the opportunity to 'win' time for an issue in parliament and on local and national TV. UK TV and national papers follow the example of French and other countries and move away from stoking simplistic or antagonistic views over important issues and support a wise and informed debate driving towards a more generally acceptable conclusion. In the Indian states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu, for example, fertility rates lower than that of China were achieved without coercion, due to public discussion over the negative effect of high fertility rates on the community. High literacy rates made this possible.
 6. **There is a sense of common purpose and shared values** : which many people want but feel we have lost. It is linked to feeling secure at home and abroad, but no longer to the ideological 'them and us' of the Cold War. The danger of a substitute Christian/Islam idea of 'them and us' is real. Sensitively and fairly handled, the over-riding imperative of securing the sustainability of environmental systems becomes the shared neutral territory for international and cultural relations. It lifts the idea of common purpose above the ideological or the economic. Amartya Sen sees democracy as a universal value, but democracy is also the system that safeguards universal values (which must include basic literacy). The debate about what universal values might be is the hallmark of a healthy civilisation, not a cause for conflict.
 7. **Citizen's feel personally responsible for the outcome of any election** whether they vote or not. The electoral process, the institutions, a mechanism for channelling views, is clearly working for people, and a way of recognising and rewarding the role of good citizenship within it is in place. In his Aung San Suu Kyi Lecture, David Miliband spoke admiringly of what he called a 'civilian surge' in Burma as people demonstrated against the military Junta. Was what happened in Kenya a civilian surge? I remember working with dissident groups in Eastern Europe during the 1980s. Long before they took to the streets in 1989 they knew there was one of two reasons why life was grim and getting grimmer. Either the government wanted that way, or it was powerless to stop it happening. Once people understood it was the latter, they knew the end of the regime was close. I am not sure we want change to be governed by civilian surges like that in Burma, Kenya or even East Germany. But with such a deep cynicism about political institutions, if times get tough it may be the default position. In a properly functioning

democracy people feel more like willing collaborators with those they elect than revolutionaries.

8. **Democratic engagement is as commonplace as shopping, election to office is an awesome life event.** Participating through election or in frequent deliberative or other processes is part and parcel of life, like shopping, or going out with friends. The act of voting is easy, not in dismal, distant halls but in the heart of community life – maybe in pubs, schools and shops – and viewed as essential. Voting may be an obligation under law, as in Belgium. Being elected – to any office – is accompanied by a high sense of honour. In a Schumacher Lecture I did on power and politics a long time ago, I suggested that if power was a fragile crystal ball filled with luminously beautiful but corrosive liquid, and passed with ceremony from one person to another, it would be treated with much more respect, not to say great care. Mistreat it, break its integrity and you and others are damaged. Hold it well and its beauty will inspire you and those around you.
9. **There is no place for a theocracy but those of all faiths or no faiths participate freely and equally.** It took a long time for Roman Catholicism to reconcile its belief in human sinfulness with popular sovereignty, and the emergence of Christian Democratic parties in Europe is one result. Some argue that Muslims should be allowed to skip the same thinking process and support a moderate ‘Muslim Democracy’ to counter the hard line political Islamists. Others comb the Koran to find passages that would sanction human beings (rather than Mohammed) looking after their affairs.¹⁴ It is problematic to be, in principle, against a religious state, not least because of the existence of Israel and the wide support for the return of the Dali Lama as ruler of Tibet. Yet, in principle, it probably is right to feel that a democracy fit for the 21st century be entirely secular, although entirely explicit about the values it represents. He takes a harder line than I do about the belief of others but I agree with A C Grayling when he says: “Mankind’s future needs the public domain to be a neutral territory where all can meet, without prejudice, as humans and equals; and that requires the wholesale privatisation of superstition.”¹⁵
10. **The culture of democracy is about collaboration, not competition:** there is widespread understanding that democracy is us. It is how we do things together. Getting things done, and securing the good relationships needed to achieve the fairness and justice that matter hugely to all but a microscopic eternally misanthropic minority, is an important part of everyday life. Like all good relationships, the democratic process is infused with open-ness, and clarity of responsibilities for *élu* and other citizens. Everyone knows what is going on. And because there is much more ‘turn-over’ of *élu* (and movement between levels) the difficulties of decision-making are understood, with the deliberative and other processes trying to help.

If the above, or anything like it, is what we would wish for our democracy, why is it so hard to get it? To ask that question is to get a series of ‘goodness knows’ shrugs in response. What I have noticed when reform is spoken of is that a plurality of political parties is a given. It is so in *The Governance of Britain*, for Freedom House, and the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, a wholly owned independent company funded by the Foreign Office. The WFD purpose is to “to achieve sustainable political change in emerging democracies. Working with and through partner organisations, **we seek to strengthen the institutions of democracy, principally political parties (through the work of the UK political parties),** parliaments and the range of institutions that make up civil society – non-governmental

¹⁴ *Islam and democracy: the practice - and the theory* The Economist 12th January 2008 pp 52-52

¹⁵ A C Grayling (2004) *What is Good: the search for the best way to live*, Phoenix, London p 237

organisations (NGOs), trade unions and free media, among others. We believe that, for a democracy to flourish, all of these institutions must be strong.”¹⁶ (my emphasis)

The uncritical approach to political parties – sometimes even called a ‘necessary evil’ - is a bit mystifying. Inconveniently and controversially, I have for some time wondered if it was time to question the benignity of political parties in the democratic process. But life continued and, despite spasms of irritation at the trivial point scoring behaviour of parliamentarians, I never quite got round to it.

Are political parties a help or a hindrance in getting the sort of democracy we need for the 21st century?

Paradoxically, what did get me going was a Young Foundation Pamphlet that set out to defend the role of political parties. *Parties for the Public Good*, reflects on where political parties come from (a relatively recent 19c invention with a job to represent classes and interests as well as values that reached a high point in the 1950s and 1960s in the UK) and although it argues that it is impossible to win state power without a party able to achieve a majority in parliament or local council, it points out the malaise affecting democracy, very much along the lines I have set out above.

Accepting the general view that “strong and stable” parties are essential to a democracy, the pamphlet makes the case for their special role. I’ve set out the headlines of that case below, with my counter view, because nothing more than reading this pamphlet’s arguments for political parties has convinced me that political parties are more of a problem than a solution to the woes of our democracy.

1. **“Synthesise coherent strategies for the nation, cities, towns and counties”** Is this true? Is coherence a feature of any manifesto you can lay your hands on? In the US they say that elections are won by poetry, and government is run with prose, so Obama is doing well by campaigning in poetry. Others say less elegantly that what you have to say to get elected tends to be the opposite of what you need to do once in power. Even more bluntly, when I stood in the 1979 election for the then Ecology Party, Denis Healey told me “you are right of course, but it is political suicide to say so.” Today, it seems, the main purpose of the party is raising funds and holding conferences, with the manifestos in the hands of the current (not the future) elected leadership.
2. **“Provide direct accountability to the public for broad strategy and direct actions”** Good heavens! And I thought the accountability was between the citizen and the *élu!* How can political parties with tiny memberships presume to represent the electorate in this way? The pamphlet explains “The strong ties of party loyalty and discipline enable leaders to deliver the promises they make.” The grindingly awful internal battles of Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrats, and the way this has hogged the limelight of public discussion of issues, plus the selective biodegradability of election promises term after term, is the riposte to that.
3. **“Help to identify new needs, ideas and issues and promote them”** With the honourable exception of the Green Party, how ahead of the game has any party been on the major issues of today – climate change, the collapse of the global resource base, obesity, the iniquitous and destructive nature of our economic system? Chris Smith’s *In Trust for Tomorrow* for Labour ought to be cited as an exception too, though the party dumped it and him without ceremony. Looking over the last couple of

¹⁶ www.wfd.org

decades, haven't scientists, the media, NGOs and what Miliband calls 'civilian surges' been better than political parties at alerting us to critical issues – closing hospitals, aging populations, collapsing pension funds, financial debt black holes, disappearing wild-life?

4. “Parties choose and groom leaders”

I can hardly deal with this for laughter. Does the electorate, when it says “they are all the same”, believe the parties are giving them the best choice of experienced and capable people for the job in hand? I think not. Has Gordon Brown a rich choice for cabinet reshuffles? Is the front bench of the Conservative Party up to snuff? How many MPs on any front bench have any management or leadership training? Or experience at doing it in real life? Running the country or council, or holding the executive to account, or representing the interests of hundred's of thousands of people must be one of the most difficult and responsible jobs there is. Recognising the problems of poor leadership and management in the public sector, this government has set up a swathe of leadership colleges – civil servants, further and higher education, local government, schools, NHS, police and so on. But not for elected or aspirant politicians. The poverty of choice of party leaders and candidates for big roles is not only a problem in UK. Who is to blame? One of the top woes of democracy is that most normal, sane people (especially women) now consider it as one of the worst jobs on earth. Not only the job itself, but because the debilitating party politics that go with it. From gaining selection to whipping, the process is crushing.

5. Parties are ways of achieving change - specialists in mobilising opinion and power and influencing apparatus of state

Again this has to be nonsense. More people belong to NGOs – or to the Church – than belong to political parties.

Parties as a public good makes recommendations on how parties can be 'remade'. It give as examples New Labour, Green Parties, Forza Italia, Respect, Scottish Socialists, the BNP and Hizbollah in the Lebanon. They cite NGOs running parallel governments and moving into party politics – like Evo Morales' Movement for Socialism in Bolivia, and Grameen in Bangladesh. Sixty one new parties were registered in the UK in 2004, prior to the 2005 general election. Half represented special interest groups, such as Croydon Pensions Alliance; Hackney Independents, Scottish Wind Watch.

Although the pamphlet does recognise there is a serious disaffection with existing parties and the political process, and say more connection between parties and supporters is necessary, the authors don't see the danger in the list of examples they give. At time of uncertainty, fear and worry, people do two things – they retreat to known territory (the tribal instinct) and become more easily attracted to strong, simple solution-mongers who may or may not be charismatic. Historically, baddies fill democratic voids faster than goodies.

The pamphlet concludes the solution is to “make parties great civic institutions, once again firmly rooted in communities and daily life” and sets out recommendations for both legislation and parties on how to do this.

I think it is too late. Certainly harking back to how it was in the 1950s is hopeless. People do not look to political parties for recreation or charity any more.

Moreover, making political parties the focus of reform is to thoroughly misplace the effort needed to get the sort of democracy envisaged above. I propose to cut out the party

middle-men (sic) and concentrate on 'remaking' the relationship between the *élu* and the citizen.

The job of democracy in the 21st century

"it is thought to be democratic for the offices to be assigned by lot, for them to be elected is oligarchic," (Aristotle)

I find myself deeply in sympathy with Aristotle. Do we really want a political class? Even though they may have degrees in politics and economics from Oxford, the majority of our politicians are narrowly educated with little experience of anything outside party politics. Perhaps over-influenced by the Chicago Sun Times report that a cebus monkey had beaten stock market 4 years running ¹⁷ I wondered if people might be called to office rather as they are called to Jury Service.

But seriously, if we do want to bring trust back into politics and remake our democracy, shouldn't we consider better ways of selecting people to represent us in parliaments and councils? A large company, or a local authority, or a NHS Trust, or a quango, or a government agency, or a charity, would not appoint any member of staff, never mind a senior one without producing a job description, inviting applications, and appointing the best person for the job. So why doesn't a democracy do the same? Running the country - or councils - on behalf of millions of people at any time, never mind one of economic, social and environmental turbulence, has to be the most responsible job anyone could have.

If we were to remove political parties from the equation, how would we go about it? Here is my proposal:

1. Instead of political parties controlling the electorate's quality of choice of candidates, why not have a job description for being a MP or MDA or council? There could be shared elements, such as explicit values and standards of public office, but with specifics depending on body.

People would then apply for the job as they would in almost every other walk of life, with a CV and explaining why they want the job and what they would bring to it. In an ideal world, lots of people would apply. Short lists would be determined in open process by citizen's juries selected to be representative of the population, and candidates then scrutinised, in the press, at hustings and so on. Key qualities looked for would be competence in weighing up arguments and evidence of good judgement. A far cry from the process used by political parties. The best people would then be elected to the job, with a duty to represent their constituency AND the best interests of the body they have joined.

2. There would be no manifesto before the election. The electorate's choice would be based on the candidate's Job Application and performance in different sorts of hustings, not on party manifestos written by outgoing administrations. The pre-voting period would give time to seek candidate views on what their thinking was on this issue or that problem. To bind candidates or *élu* to a party line or manifesto commitment ahead of or regardless of changing circumstances is daft.

¹⁷ David Roeder *Primal Picks* Chicago Sun-Times, 14th January 2007

3. Constituencies may be geographical, or interest based (as for the Irish Senate) or a mixture. Several people may be elected from one constituency, and the voting system would facilitate that.
4. After the election, the parliament or council debates and selects its Cabinet (to work like a Board) and its Programme of Government, with the outcomes desired clearly laid out. In practice the Cabinet will oversee the implementation of the Programme of Government, and have to be sure its decisions, including any changes meet the approval of some pre-determined majority of the other parliamentarians (who, in effect, become the Cabinet's stakeholder group.) Debate and voting is about collectively ensuring the best possible decision-making on behalf of the constituency. Opposition, support and clarification is debated on the matter at issue, not hidden by whipping along party lines.

The Programme of Government would be based on priorities identified during the election, and public and parliamentary debate. Any deviation from that programme, caused by new events or information, can be justified in public.

5. Evaluation of the performance of an MP would be against the Job Description, their contribution to the Programme of Government in parliament and as a constituency MP. It can be done locally and in parliament. The track record of the *élu* is available if they seek re-election ANYWHERE and is an honourable thing to include in applying for any other job. At the moment, membership of a political party has to be declared much as certain convictions under law might have to be!
6. If circumstances demand it, the parliament may go out to deliberative processes – in civil society, amongst scientists, women or other stakeholders – to improve their decision-making. (Some of this sort of deliberation is starting to happen as faith in opinion polls and consultants wavers. It is a much healthier process than relying on reviews by mostly superannuated businessmen.) By the same token, regions, or other groups may use petitions (see fruitful public debate above) to bring issues forward to the elected body, as well as through the normal relationship with their elected members.
7. The thrust of *Governance of Britain* on making powers crystal clear for different levels of governments is right. But far too timid and a long way from giving the real power (and accountability) to local bodies that is needed to revitalise civic engagement. Local and national government should work in collaboration towards the common good – not in competition or with the current debilitating lack of clarity over authority.
8. The process outlined above will bring an end to manipulative parliamentary activities – like whipping – that override best judgement of individual MPs. The system of parliamentary committees is a good one, and with better communications through the elected body and direct to the citizens will make them more effectively involved in the general public debate. The Power Report suggestion that all meetings with interest groups/lobbyists should be recorded is also a good one.
9. If many more people are to be involved in the democratic process and its institutions, lots of capacity building will be needed. It is not just about the knowledge and skills required to be a member of the Cabinet, but basic life skills like reading, writing, counting can make a huge difference. (see example from Kerela above) To be sustainability literate would include, in my view, democratic literacy.

The narrow knowledge and life experience of many *élu* and their tendency to re-invent wheels because of it, has made me a fan of the wise elder as a model for good governance.

This puts a premium on people who have demonstrated good judgement in life, and have the experience and skills for leadership. Around the world, for better or worse, it remains one of the most common forms of governance – especially at local level, and even where the state seems to have failed (e.g Congo). It is evidence that, whatever iniquities are done in the name of power, the fundamental human desire for fairness and justice is inextinguishable. But key to the success of the wise elder model of governance that I witnessed in Mali is the ‘permission’ needed from women and young people who watched the elders’ deliberation closely. A modern version could perhaps use time-limited quotas for younger *élu* a sort of apprenticeship time in the parliament or council so they can learn through experience. A further refinement could be that no-one sits for more than 2 terms, before a ‘rest’ of 2 terms before applying again. If only 1/3 of the body is up for election at one time, a flow of fresh blood without loss of collective knowledge or experience would be possible.

My assumption is that women in particular would be attracted to this more congenial way of participating in democracy. The ‘glass ceiling’ identified as the reason why women do not get into senior positions in the private or public sector is as much down to women looking at life above the ceiling and the process and behaviours needed to get there and saying “no thank you” as anything else. For years ‘fixing women’ (and ethnic minorities) so they fitted into existing models of leadership was thought to be the solution, when the answer is to revolutionise the way top leadership jobs are got and done so that they are attractive to women (and exploit the best rather than the worst in men).

Conclusion

We need to sort it within the next decade. Getting more enjoyable and effective systems of democracy and justice into place around the world, should work to the same timetable as that for redirecting investment and public policy to a low-carbon, high human satisfaction way of life. We have to hope they will feed beneficially off one another and bring trust, the essential ingredient back into all political relationships. With imagination and verve, it can be done. Tackling the top challenges of the 21st century is a social enterprise. We can still decide that it will bring out the best of us, rather than the worst.

So, down with political parties! And up with collaborative democracy! Anyone want to join my revolution?

